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POESY:
AN ESSAY IN RHYME.

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

Enosinian and Philophrenian Societies

OF

COLUMBIAN COLLEGE,
WASHINGTON, D. C.,

AT THE

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, ON THE EVENING OF THE 28th OF JUNE, 1859.

BY
JOHN R. THOMPSON.

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PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETIES.
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C O R R E S P O N D E N C E .

COLLEGE HILL, *D. C.*, *Oct. 8th*, 1859.

DEAR SIR: I am directed again to call your attention to the resolutions of the Enosinian and Philophrenian Societies, passed at a joint meeting held on the 29th day of June last, thanking you for the very beautiful Poem recited before them on the evening of June 28th, and earnestly requesting a copy for publication. Hoping you may now see fit to gratify this, their sincere desire,

I am, with sentiments of respect,

Your obedient servant,

WM. L. WILSON.

JNO. R. THOMPSON, Esq.

RICHMOND, *October 10*, 1859.

MY DEAR SIR: With my best thanks for your polite note, requesting for publication a copy of the Poem which I had the honor to recite, in June last, before the Literary Societies of Columbian College, I take pleasure in complying with your wishes.

Yours, very truly,

JNO. R. THOMPSON.

WM. L. WILSON, Esq.

POESY.

In ancient Greece, where Art, we know, was born,
In the fresh gladness of her early morn ;
When Learning, laurelled goddess, sweetly smiled
Above the cradle of her fairest child—
They kept in Athens sacred festival
Of eloquence, and song, and wit, and all
That made of Attica a classic land,
From lofty Pindus to the shining strand :
With music's lordly swell, the stately train
Moved onward to Minerva's glittering fane,
Where from the fervid lips of genius flowed
The measured chorus and the sparkling ode,
Pure as Ilissus, where its waters run
A stream of flashing silver in the sun :
And thousand voices, mingling in the pæan,
Stirred the light wave upon the blue Ægean.
——Two thousand changeful years have passed away
Of cruel havoc and of fell decay—
The polished temples, 'neath the brilliant sky
Of old Athena now in ruin lie ;
And a deep pathos, a most tender pity
Subdues the soul within the ancient city :
The Erechtheum—how each fragment shines !

What desolate beauty in the broken lines !
The Parthenon—alas, the summer breeze
Kisses no more at morn the perfect frieze
Which once revealed the glory and the joy,
Panathenaic, to the Grecian boy.
But the great poems of the bards sublime
Remain unwasted by the wreck of Time ;
Graceful and calm, in symmetry severe,
These wondrous temples of the mind appear ;
And light, in richer flood than that which fills
The smiling circuit of the Athenian hills,
Streams upon shaft and portico and floor,
“ The light that never was on sea or shore ! ”

Well may we then the lyric mode combine
With glowing eloquence, at Learning's shrine,
When our Panathenæa's rites we hold,
Not with the gorgeous pomp and pride of old,
Not yielding homage to the gods that reigned
On high Olympus, as the mythos feigned,
But with ascriptions of perennial praise
To the brave singers of immortal lays ;
And all who robe the beauteous form of Truth
In the bright colors of unfading youth,
From Æschylus to Shakspeare, from the trees
Where Wisdom early strayed with Socrates,
To the lone tower where Newton's tireless eye
Read the strange riddle of the midnight sky.
Such rites we celebrate when Science calls
Her favoured children to a hundred halls,

To bless the guerdons, nobly won, which prove
An Alma Mater's all-abiding love !

You ask for rhymes, you bid me idly seek
To throw the soft enchantment of the Greek
O'er the rapt sense in a beguiling dream—
Vain task ! but still be Poesy my theme :
Turn with me then awhile, and learn the spell
Its ministers have left on "flood and fell"—
Summon the Past, and bid its voice rehearse
Man's chequered story since the primal curse ;
Or take Imagination's widest range
O'er ivied battlement and moated grange,
And mark what renders most a people great,
And still survives the ruin of the State ;
How the long, joyous, pensive, tender strain
Of the world's music cheats the world of pain—
How Fancy brightens with her magic rays
The shadowy vista of departed days,
And casts along the Ages' downward slope
The blended hues of Memory and of Hope !

Soft you, my modest muse, nor rashly dare
A flight so lofty through the realms of air :
With a vague sense of littleness oppress
I walk around the Theban eagle's nest,
Conscious that could I steal his mighty wings,
To me such very unfamiliar things
Would be as useless as were Roman sandals
To one of Attila's large-footed Vandals—

And here the horrid old Horatian maxim,
Which the poor rhymers had so long to tax him,
The bard remembers, and may fitly quote,
(Though doubtless many have the line by rote,)
That neither gods nor men, in their distress,
Nor yet the columns of the weekly press,
Can view as other than a dreadful wrong
The lowlier offerings of tuneful song—
A line which means, as certain critics think,
That smaller poets should not deal in ink,
And that until the mighty prophets come
The part of Poesy is to be dumb.
Dishonoured ever be the narrow rule
Which claims no reverence in kind Nature's school,
Which neither Summer's birds nor blooms obey
In the glad minstrelsy of rising day.
Your Miltons, Goethes, are an age apart,
Meanwhile shall *no* one touch the world's sad heart?
The stately aloe's snowy bloom appears
But once, we know, within a hundred years:
Because, forsooth, the aloe is the glory
Of Chatsworth's notable conservatory,
Shall not the modest daisy from the sod
Turn its meek eyes in beauty up to God?
In nature's daily prayer, when comes the dawn
To tell its beads upon the dewy lawn,
Shall the sweet matins of the rosy hours
Miss the pure incense of the *little* flowers?
Oh, gentle spirits, wheresoe'er you dwell,
On breezy upland or in quiet dell,

Whether you sing in solitude and shade,
Or in the sullen, crowded haunts of trade,—
Whose simple rhyming, in its artless grace,
Has touched some hidden sorrow of the race,
Or taught the world one humble lesson more
Of subtle beauty all unknown before,
Or soothed one heart, just when its need was sorest,
With harmonies of ocean and of forest,—
To you be ever honorable meed,
In spite of captious Horace and his creed.
While the great poets soar beyond the ken
Of the world's toiling, heaving mass of men,
Like the proud falcon quickly lost to view
In the wide field of heaven's o'erarching blue,—
You linger round the dwellings of our love,
As birds that carol in the eaves above,
And fill forever, as the days increase,
Our homes with music and our hearts with peace.

The world has changed—there are who gravely doubt
If the great epics have not long died out—
No more in grandeur the Homeric line
Repeats the story of a Troy divine—
No more the pealing mediæval hymn
Rolls down the shadowy canto, vast and dim,
A minster, noblest of cathedral piles,
Where Spencer rambles through his woodland aisles,—
No more the high Miltonic verse reveals
The glooms and glories of the awful seals—

In blaze supernal or in dread eclipse—
Of some new uninspired Apocalypse :
If these are with th' imperishable Past,
The Epic surely had not sung its last ;
For never swept across Time's ample stage
An unimpassioned, unheroic age—
And countless generations yet to be,
In later eras of the world, shall see
A life as worthy of the epic strain
As that which fired the age of Charlemagne,
And future masters of the lyre shall raise
The swelling epos of our modern days.
But while the amaranth waits for kingly brows,
Some laurel wreaths our grateful love allows
To him whose sunny genius lifts to light
The meanest objects of our daily sight :
Who seeks to brighten still the links that bind
In blest communion all of human kind ;
Or passion's tempest in the breast would calm
With some sweet, lowly, penitential psalm :
Such poets sow the seeds of truth and beauty
To blossom into holy faith and duty—
And though the tares of selfishness and pride
Spring up to choke them upon every side,
And many a tender shoot the world erases
From the hard pavements of its market-places,
Some fall on friendly soil, warm hearts and true,
Where watered by affection's kindest dew,
They stretch their boughs into the upper air,
And in due season richer fruitage bear

Than fabled branches hung with globes of gold,
Some thirty, fifty, some an hundred fold !

Would'st know the value of a simple rhyme
Sent down the widening, deepening stream of time ?
Let Memory seek, amidst the august scenes
So recent—scarce a lustrum intervenes,
The chamber where the dying Webster lay,
And heard the elegiac melodies of Gray
Mingling with ocean's everlasting roar
Borne through the casement from the neighb'ring shore,
The deathless music of th' immortal mind
With Nature's grandest symphonies combined.
Or note the contrast well afforded here
And let the triumph of the bard appear.
Two monumental tributes to the brave
Mark one a famous, one a lonely grave—
Earth's proudest city, gay with gilded spires
And domes which kindle in the sunset's fires,
Guards one, with marble muses looking down
Where sleeps the dust that wore the Caesar's crown :
The universal Earth, the common air
Contain the other—it is everywhere,
As far as mighty England's form of speech,
Blown wide upon the wings of fame, can reach,
Before the mental eye, its shape it rears
Above a turf bedewed with grateful tears ;
And when Napoleon's obsequies, with all
Their gorgeous pageantry of plumes and pall,

Have faded quite away from man's esteem,
Like the swift splendours of a passing dream;
When the proud chapel shall itself display
A shattered monument of sad decay—
And queenly Paris shall have shared the fate
Of Tadmor overthrown and desolate;
That plaintive Monody, whose numbers tell
Of him that bravely at Corunna fell—
His silent burial near the midnight camp,
By the pale moonbeam and the glimmering lamp,
Shall still the cruel waste of years defy,
Enduring cenotaph of Poesy!

Would'st learn the fire and frenzy that belong
To the hot verses of the battle-song?
Hark! to the sounds that the exulting breeze
Brings to our land across the rolling seas
From distant Gallia's proud ancestral shores,
Where to the fight the glittering column pours.
The active Zouave, the gallant, gay Chasseur,
Feel a new life and impulse in the stir—
With ribbons decked, with faces bronzed and scarred,
Move on the serried legions of the Guard,
Whose steady look of fierce resolve befits
The veteran chivalry of Austerlitz.
Listen! what thrilling words are these that greet
The excited thousands of that crowded street?
Not freedom's flag the imperial line displays,
But yet they sing, they shout the Marseillaise!

In vain the cautious monarch would repress
That song's impassioned and resistless stress,
Unchained as lightning, with electric start
Its sudden thrill is sent from heart to heart :
And if, oh Italy, devoted land,
Once more begirt with beauty, thou shalt stand
Erect among the nations of the earth,
In all the strength of Freedom's second birth,
The force that still must drive the avenging steel
Lives in the lyric of Rouget de Lisle !

And yet not long, oh Poesy, not long,
May War, earth's oldest and its direst Wrong,
Demand thy pæans—Mercy waits and pleads
With thee to celebrate *her* glorious deeds.
While many a golden-roofed cathedral rings
With the Te Deums of victorious kings,
And from the crimsoned field, by combat riven,
The blood of hecatombs appeals to Heaven,
Thine is a higher, holier evangel,
And thine the rustling pinions of the angel
That comes, with softest sunshine in its face,
To soothe and bless and elevate the race—
Celestial visitant, that walked with Burns,
“Following the plough,” or when the poet turns
To catch the Cotter's evening hymn of praise,
Sung by the ingle's ever-cheerful blaze ;—
That dwelt with Rydal's bard, all round the year,
By the sweet margin of Winandermere ;

And flying wide across the dusky downs
Into the heart of England's fevered towns,
Unseen of other men, serenely stood
Beside the form of gentle Thomas Hood,
With drooping plumage and dejected eyes,
By the dark river of the Bridge of Sighs !

The world has changed—there are who much deplore
That the bright reign of Poesy is o'er—
Who tell us that as man each year recedes
From the sweet trustfulness of childhood's creeds,
And sees these cherished blossoms die within
The baleful glare of worldliness and sin—
So, as the planet on its course is rolled,
As age of iron follows age of gold,
The dear illusion we would *not* resist
Fades, like a curtain of dissolving mist,
Before the glare of science, reaching far
From wave to mountain, and from star to star.
And still dethroning, disenchanting fast
The idols and the idylls of the Past.
We'll not believe it. Shall the windy ocean
Stop the careering of its rhythmic motion,
Or 'neath the moonlight, when the whirlwinds cease,
No longer woo us to a dream of peace,
Because a Maury, standing at the helm,
Drives the proud bark of Science o'er its realm,
Detects its viewless currents in their courses,
And brings to measurement its mighty forces ?

Shall not the sun still seek the Jungfrau's side
To deck with diamonds his majestic bride—
Shall not the glacier's beryl-tinted caves,
Beneath the glittering waste of icy waves,
Still shake with hallelujahs, peal on peal,
And all Chamouni's templed valley reel,
From brawling Arve to pinnacled Aiguille,
Because a learned botanist uncloses
The scarlet petals of the Alpine roses,
And some pale student asks the frozen arch
The secret of the glacier's onward march?
Ah, "star-eyed Science!" Fancy claims in thee
A loving sister of the World To Be—
Admits each worthy, reverent son of thine
As priest to worship at her radiant shrine,
And comes with tenderest sorrow, in her turn,
To place a garland upon Humboldt's urn.

All, all are poets on whom God confers
The gift of Nature's true interpreters;
While the eternal hills their anthems raise
And swelling oceans vocalize His praise.
But not alone from woods, and rocks, and streams,
Niagaras and Alps, and starry gleams,
Must the true poet catch his inspirations
To chant the De Profundis of the nations—
'Tis his to turn from Nature's outward things
And trace, with prophet-glance, the hidden springs
Of human life and action in the soul,

Whence the unceasing torrents rage and roll
With headlong fury to the shoreless main,
In thunder worthy of his loftiest strain.
And not from cloud and rainbow must he draw
The subtle principle of Beauty's Law.
'Tis his to wander from purpureal skies
And loveliest landscapes, with a glad surprise,
And gaze delighted into Woman's eyes—
And, as the languor-loving Cingalese,
Whose look is bent on India's opal seas,
Are ever mindful of the pearls that glow
With lambent lustre in the deeps below—
To mark therein the priceless gems that shine
Of Truth and Purity and Faith Divine :
And more than all 'tis his in joy to preach
The glorious gospel of unfettered speech,
And sing the high divinity of man
By Freedom far removed from kingly ban ;
Well may the noble theme inspire his rhyme
In this our richly-favoured western clime,
Whose banner streams against the sunset's bars
And blends its baldrie with the dripping stars,
Where Peace has left her name upon the tide
And through the Golden Gates the world's great navies ride !

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